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Middle Eastern Déjà Vu and the U.S.–Israeli War of Choice Against Iran

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Background

Machiavelli, in his treatise *the Prince*, rightfully points out that wars begin when one wills them, but they do not end when one desires (Machiavelli, 1532). This is well manifested in both the current ongoing crisis in the Middle East and historically, where wars have emerged from ambiguous objectives that have brought immense hardship to civilians: a similar pattern seen in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and now Iran. The current military campaign against Iran, as of now, is no different from previous wars in the region, whose results have always diverged from the expectations of those who started them.

For decades following the Islamic Republic Revolution in 1979, the relationship between the regime and its adversaries evolved through a series of confrontations and rivalries. This began with the Hostage Crisis and continued through U.S. support for Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War, while Israel, paradoxically, provided covert military assistance to Iran, as Saddam Hussein was perceived at the time as country’s main threat. After the war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the rise of Ayatollah Khamenei marked a new phase. Both rhetorically and operationally, the regime intensified its confrontation through the creation of the so-called “Axis of Resistance,” an ideological stance aimed ultimately at opposing the West and destroying Israel. In this sense, Islamic Republic’s foreign policy has since been fundamentally shaped by ideological hostility inspired by Shi’i political Islam directed against both Washington and Jerusalem.

To counter this, both the U.S. and Israel employed various strategies aimed at curbing the regional influence of the regime and limiting its missile and nuclear capabilities. The triangular confrontation of proxy wars, sanctions, and covert operations gradually created an environment in which a direct military confrontation became inevitable. Therefore, the current war should not be seen as a sudden eruption but as the culmination of decades of mounting tensions, where the attacks of October 7, much like the aftermath of 9/11, finally ignited a long-smoldering fire.

The scale and brutality of the October 7 attacks, combined with the regime’s financial, military, and ideological support for Hamas, allowed Israeli officials to frame subsequent military operations against Iran as a necessary response to an existential threat. This approach was articulated through what became known as the “Octopus Doctrine,” which emphasizes striking the “head of the octopus”, the Islamic Republic, as the root of regional instability. For Israel, the attacks also presented an opportunity to conduct extensive military operations against Hamas and Hezbollah, weakening both organizations. This success created a perception among Americans

and Israelis officials that the regime had entered one of the most vulnerable phases in its history, making a direct confrontation less risky.

A second key factor was the presence of Trump in the U.S. presidency. During his first term, Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and implemented a policy of “maximum pressure,” focusing on economic sanctions and political isolation to force Iran into complete capitulation. The killing of General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of IRGC, represented perhaps the most consequential action of this period. Trump’s second term, however, showed a greater tendency toward direct military intervention, initially in the Twelve-Day War and, subsequently, the U.S.-Israeli military campaign that began on February 28, 2026: Operation Epic Fury for the United States and Raising Lion for Israel.

The Unlearned Lessons of the Iraq War

Many wars are initiated not out of strategic necessity but because of political disagreements and miscalculations (Haass, 2010). This was precisely the case with the Second Iraq War, a conflict that was neither driven by an imminent threat nor by unavoidable security imperatives but rather constituted a fundamentally unnecessary war (ibid). At its core, the principal criteria typically used to justify the initiation of war: the worthiness of the cause, the likelihood of success, and the legitimacy of the authority undertaking the operation, were all subject to serious doubt in the case of Iraq (ibid). From an operational and analytical perspective, the Iraq War imposed enormous costs (ibid). These included the deaths of American soldiers and Iraqi civilians, staggering financial expenditures, a serious strain on the military capacity of the US, and the broader proliferation of terrorism and anti-Americanism (ibid).

In essence, the execution of a war must produce a reasonable ratio between costs and benefits; if such a balance cannot be achieved, the war is neither a sound idea nor one that should be undertaken (Haass, 2010). Another critical lesson concerns the assumptions surrounding regime change and democratic transformation. When these ambitions encountered the historical realities of Iraq, its political culture, the legacy of Saddam Hussein, and the country’s complex religious, ethnic, tribal, and geographic dynamics, the costs of the war increased substantially and achieving the anticipated outcomes became far more difficult and uncertain (ibid).

What has become evident after two weeks of war against Iran bears strong similarities to the Iraq War and to what is described as a war of choice. The conflict appears to lack a clear strategic necessity and instead reflects a pattern of escalation that closely resembles earlier discretionary military interventions. Thus far, the predominantly air campaign conducted by the US and Israel has already resulted in many casualties. At the time of writing, the attacks have reportedly killed thirteen American personnel (Britzky & Lendon, 2026), and fifteen Israelis, in addition to more than a thousand Iranians and more than six hundred Lebanese citizens (Melimopoulos, 2026). The financial burden of the conflict has also been considerable. Reports indicate that the war cost

approximately eleven billion dollars in its first six days alone, implying a daily expenditure of roughly one billion dollars for American taxpayers (Noury, 2026).

Although Iran's military capabilities remain fundamentally inferior to those of nuclear-armed states such as the United States and Israel, Tehran has nonetheless demonstrated an ability to strike regional U.S. bases using indigenous missile and drone technologies. According to *The New York Times*, at least seventeen American sites have been targeted in these attacks with substantial damages (Erden & Abraham, 2026). Perhaps the most consequential move by Tehran, however, concerns its capacity to disrupt the global energy supply. As Vali Nasr argues in his recent article:

“Iran is playing the long game. In war, geography matters as much as technology. Iran commands the entire northern shore of the Gulf, looming large over energy fields on its southern shore and all that passes through its waters. Its Houthi allies are perched at the entrance to the Red Sea and along the passage to the Suez Canal; Iran is thus perfectly positioned to squeeze the global economy from both sides of the Arabian Peninsula. Those in command of Iran today are veterans of asymmetric wars in Iraq and Syria. They are now applying the same strategy to fighting the US on the battlefield of the global economy. Drones, short-range missiles and mines setting tankers and ports on fire can have the same effect IEDs had in Iraq, only with greater impact—disrupting global supply chains and sending oil prices higher. Iran could sustain its counteroffensive more easily and for far longer. (Nasr, 2026)”

A further characteristic of war of choice can be observed in the inconsistent rhetoric of U.S. officials. While Israel and Netanyahu have repeatedly invoked the language of regime change and the promise of bringing freedom to people, this framing has not been consistent in the discourse of Trump. He has repeatedly changed his rhetoric: at times speaking openly about regime change, while at other moments expressing preference for the emergence of a new leader from within who must align closely with U.S. interests. This approach resembles earlier attempts to influence political outcomes in Venezuela where its effectiveness has itself been subject to a considerable doubt. What is already clear, however, is that the present conflict differs immensely from the Venezuelan one, which finished within hours. By contrast, the current war has continued for nearly two weeks and has produced extensive destruction and instability across the region, while simultaneously threatening global economic and energy security.

Moreover, if one attempts to assess the potential success of the current coalition campaign against Iran, the events that followed the killing of the former Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, can be interpreted through the concept of decapitation. Decapitation refers to the use of military force, often through precision airpower, to eliminate key political and military leadership figures as well as command-and-control infrastructure (Pape, 1996). The underlying assumption is that leadership and communication networks represent the Achilles' heel of a modern state; once these structures are destroyed, the political system is expected to collapse regardless of the strength of its conventional military capabilities (ibid). A related variation of this strategy involves using

airpower to create the conditions under which internal actors, either through popular revolt or elite coups, overthrow the existing government and replace it with one more willing to make political concessions.

Yet historically, decapitation campaigns have rarely succeeded in toppling regimes (Pape, 1996). The case of Saddam Hussein illustrates this limitation clearly. Despite one of the most extensive decapitation-oriented air campaigns in modern military history, during which dozens of leadership targets and over 150 command-and-control facilities were attacked, the Iraqi regime did not collapse because of these strikes (ibid). Even in Iraq, a state with a long history of coups and an unpopular leader, the strategy failed to produce the anticipated political outcome (ibid).

From this perspective, the current conflict appears to follow a pattern like that observed in Iraq. According to recent U.S. intelligence assessments, Iran's leadership structure remains largely intact and is not considered to be at imminent risk of collapse despite nearly two weeks of sustained U.S. and Israeli bombardment (Banco & Landay, 2026). They have indicated that the regime still maintains effective control over the domestic population (ibid). Consequently, the prospect of regime collapse through airpower alone remains highly uncertain. This is further compounded by the increasingly hardline rhetoric of Iranian officials. The selection of Mojtaba Khamenei as the new Supreme Leader, widely regarded as more ideologically rigid and closely aligned with the IRGC, may in fact signal a consolidation rather than a weakening of the regime's political structure.

A Foggy Future and Possible Scenarios

Scenario One (More Probable): Considering the limited success of the coalition in achieving its stated objectives: whether changing the behavior of the regime or producing regime change as well as the substantial damage already inflicted on the region, U.S. domestic politics, and the global economy, the trajectory of the war may gradually shift toward a strategy of maximum military and infrastructural weakening of Iran, ultimately leading to a frozen conflict. Several developments reinforce this possibility. The disruption of maritime security around the Strait of Hormuz and the resulting constraints on economic activity in the Arab states of Persian Gulf have already raised global economic concerns. At the same time, the financial burden of the war for the US continues to grow. Despite nearly two weeks of heavy bombardment and the killing of several senior commanders, the Islamic Republic's retaliatory responses have not ceased. Moreover, there have been no significant reports of large-scale domestic protests capable of threatening regime stability. Under these conditions, the objective of the coalition may gradually evolve toward long-term containment rather than immediate transformation.

A weakened Iranian state, potentially approaching the condition of a fragile or partially failed state, would allow the US and Israel to conduct future military operations under more predictable and

lower-cost conditions. For Israel in particular, such an outcome may even represent a preferable scenario. The existence of a weakened Iranian state would reinforce ongoing regional securitization narratives directed against the Islamic Republic, strengthening the rationale for continued U.S. support to Israel and for future military operations. Domestically within Iran, however, the likely outcome would be the emergence of a more militarized political order. Leadership could become increasingly symbolic, while real power shifts behind the scenes to the IRGC. In such a system, domestic repression would almost certainly intensify, as the regime seeks to prevent renewed popular uprisings. Nevertheless, it is highly probable that Iran's regional influence will decline significantly in the immediate aftermath of the current conflict, particularly when considered alongside the earlier twelve-day confrontation that had already weakened elements of Tehran's regional network.

Scenario Two (Less Probable): A second, less likely scenario involves a dramatic escalation toward direct military intervention on the ground. The forty-seven-year tyrannic rule of the Islamic Republic has generated deep grievances among Iranians, and in recent months many people, specially within the diaspora, have shown support for external intervention under the banner of humanitarian intervention aimed at ending totalitarian rule. If US and Israeli officials conclude that airpower alone cannot achieve decisive results, and if additional pressures emerge, such as the prolonged closure of the Strait of Hormuz or a renewed strategic commitment by Washington and Tel Aviv to pursue regime change, the possibility of deploying ground forces could theoretically enter future calculations.

Yet such an option would be extraordinarily risky. Iran's vast geography, population size, and organized ground forces make it fundamentally different from cases such as Iraq, Libya, or Afghanistan. The potential human costs for U.S. and Israeli forces would be considerable, and the probability of success remains deeply uncertain. If such an intervention were nevertheless to occur, the likelihood of regime change in Iran would become substantially higher. However, the experience of contemporary Middle Eastern history suggests that regime change carried out under the rhetoric of "delivering freedom" has often produced prolonged instability, civil conflict, and state fragmentation rather than stable democratic transitions. Sustainable political transformation is more likely to emerge through institutional development, including improved education systems, the strengthening of the rule of law, and the protection of civil society, rather than through externally imposed military intervention (Haass, 2010). Until then, outcomes of new wars that happen in the region are nothing but a common Middle Eastern *Déjà vu*.

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